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SUBJECT: ELYSEE READOUT OF SARKOZY'S SEPTEMBER 3-4 VISIT TO
DAMASCUS

REF: POUNDS-HALE E-MAIL OF 9/5

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathleen H. Allegrone, reas
ons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: During his September 3-4 visit to Damascus, President Sarkozy told Syrian President Bashar al-Asad that in order to establish a leader Khalid Mishal to encourage the latter to deliver a letter to captured Franco-Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit (although al-Asad declined to convey the letter to Mishal himself). Boillon distanced Sarkozy from ideas the MFA attempted to table at the Sept. 6 Gymnich regarding how the EU could play a more active role on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. On a sobering note, Boillon said he met last week with a personal envoy from Saudi King Abdallah, who detailed a Saudi plan to spend up to \$1 billion dollars to support Sunni groups in Lebanon in the upcoming parliamentary elections and "against Hizballah." End summary.

Sarkozy Spells it Out for Bashar al-Asad

¶2. (C) President Sarkozy, during his September 3-4 visit to Damascus, delivered a frank message to his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Asad, according to Boris Boillon (the Middle East Counselor at the Elysee). Per Boillon, Sarkozy told al-Asad that in order to build a relationship of trust with France, Syria would need to respect its commitments (e.g., normalizing relations with Lebanon) and respect certain non-negotiable principles (e.g., Lebanon's sovereignty and the inviolability of the International Tribunal on the Hariri assassination). Moreover, Sarkozy noted that France would be watching closely to see whether Syria attained certain benchmarks by the end of the year, namely: the exchange of ambassadors with Lebanon (the most critical benchmark in Boillon's opinion); the modification of the Syria-Lebanon High Council; and the restoration of three defunct commissions to discuss refugees, borders, and to review existing treaties. Al-Asad reaffirmed his previous commitment to Sarkozy to exchange ambassadors with Lebanon before the end of the year, and to make progress on the other issues. Boillon stressed that Sarkozy remained "pragmatic" about Damascus and would make a dispassionate decision at year's end on whether the Syrians had attained the benchmarks and, consequently, where to take the relationship. He would not be swayed by pecuniary concerns in dealing with what France sees as an unimportant trading partner. ("They are nothing for us," scoffed Boillon, who observed that Syria froze trading opportunities in 2007 and France was now 61 in the ranks of Syrian trading partners. He acknowledged that several business leaders, including the CEO of Total and a wealthy Syrian-origin entrepreneur, had been on the trip. He also confirmed exploratory talks on the sale of 14 Airbus aircraft to Syria and said that U.S. components would pose problems for such a sale, but added it was a commercial deal that the GOF was not actively pushing). Sarkozy's view remains that if the Syrians do not perform, then "tant pis" (too bad for them) said Boillon, who conceded that the Elysee has not yet given much thought as to where it would like to take the relationship if the Syrians pass muster. Boillon noted that FM Kouchner will likely see FM Muallim in November at a follow-on meeting for the Mediterranean Union, which will give the French an opportunity to signal to the Syrians whether they are on track for a passing grade in December, which might result in a second, longer visit by Sarkozy to Damascus.

¶3. (C) Noting that Sarkozy also pressed al-Asad on Israel, Iran, and human rights, Boillon assessed that Bashar has been weakened by the assassination of Mohammed Suleiman and would

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himself be "finished" if he were to publicly acknowledge Israel's successful attack on Syria's nuclear research facility, an attack to which the Syrians made no effective riposte. Al-Asad professed to be concerned by the delay in the next round of indirect Syrian-Israeli peace talks and, in response to a query from Sarkozy, claimed to have no objection to indirect peace talks between Lebanon and Israel that might proceed in tandem with the Syrian-Israeli track. However, al-Asad claimed that the Lebanese themselves were not prepared to take such a step. Boillon claimed that Sarkozy had made some progress in shaping al-Asad's thinking on the Iran nuclear question by asking how the latter could be confident that Tehran's nuclear program is for civilian use in the absence of international inspection. (Unfortunately, Sarkozy did not use this moment of epiphany to suggest that al-Asad also re-think Syria's candidacy for a seat on the IAEA Board of Governors.)
Human Rights

¶4. (C) The Syrians, clearly anticipating Sarkozy's talking points on human rights, adroitly deflected the brunt of his message by suggesting that France channel future human rights demands (e.g., lists of prisoners to be released) through Qatar so as "to avoid the optic of Syria caving into Western pressure." The French seem to have swallowed this specious argument, although Boillon claimed that there was a "favorable evolution" in al-Asad's position on the case of

kidnapped Franco-Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit: Bashar, although he declined to deliver a letter from Shalit's father to Hamas Political Bureau chief Khalid Mishal, agreed to speak to Mishal and encourage him to see that the letter is delivered on humanitarian grounds. The French believe that al-Asad fulfilled this commitment.

15. (S) Boillon dismissed the September 4 quad meeting of Sarkozy, al-Asad, Turkish PM Erdogan, and Qatari Emir al-Thani as a largely academic exchange of views, with little meaningful discussion (although he observed that al-Asad and Erdogan were each surprisingly well-informed about Darfur). He also reported that on the margins of the visit, Syrian FM Muallim had told the French delegation that Syria could do without an EU association agreement if the alternative was the conditionality outlined in the letter he received a few weeks ago from his Spanish, German and Italian counterparts. The significance of Muallim's statement, in Boillon's view, is that the Israelis have yet to realize that the prospect of an EU association agreement is not a significant incentive for Damascus.

MEPP/Saudi Initiative for Lebanon

16. (S) Turning to other regional issues, Boillon distanced Sarkozy from a set of ideas that the MFA had hoped to present at the September 6 Gymnich working lunch on how the EU could play a more active role in supporting the Middle East peace process; Boillon acknowledged that they reflect ideas Sarkozy has supported, but characterized them as "reflections" that did not represent a new initiative on the part of France. On Lebanon, Boillon said that notwithstanding the somewhat gloomy reporting from the French embassy in Beirut, he believed the overall situation in the country was relatively good at the moment. He described President Sleiman as "very, very cautious -- and that's putting it diplomatically," whereas he saw Michel Aoun as "an enigma who nevertheless represents many Lebanese Christians -- we don't have much contact with him, perhaps wrongly." Boillon expressed concern about funding from the Gulf states for Salafist groups in and around Tripoli, noting that a former Lebanese Prime Minister had recently walked him through the reason the Salafists abrogated an agreement with Hizballah the day after signing it (the reason, said Boillon, is that one branch of the Salafist clan funded by Kuwaitis had been over-ruled by another branch funded by Saudis). On a related note, Boillon confided that last week he met with a "personal envoy" (NFI) from Saudi King Abdallah, who outlined an initiative to provide up to USD \$1 billion dollars in support to Lebanese Sunni groups for use in the upcoming parliamentary elections and for defense "against Hizballah." "If that is the Saudi vision for Lebanon, that is truly worrisome," said Boillon, who was simultaneously arranging a meeting for visiting Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, who was in France on September 9 on an unannounced visit to his Parisian residence.

Comment

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17. (S) Comment: Boillon is an engaging and enthusiastic interlocutor whose personal loyalty to Sarkozy is palpable. We believe his readout to be largely accurate, although we are somewhat skeptical of Bashar's alleged epiphany on the Iranian nuclear program, and somewhat dismayed that the Syrians seem to have so easily deflected the French president on the question of human rights. As for the benchmarks, we believe the Elysee is sincere in its desire to hold the Syrians to objective perform that rather than trying to derail France's rapprochement with Syria -- a train that has already left the station -- our goal should be to maintain a continual, candid dialogue with the Elysee on Syria's be